

## *History You Can Hear*

### Music of the Past - The Story of the Huron Carol

By Claire Keller-Scholz ~ Editor

If you've been around Fort Nisqually Living History Museum during the Christmas event in the past few years, you may have heard the haunting melody and evocative lyrics of the Huron Carol. Known as the first "Canadian Christmas Carol," the song was written c. 1642 by a Catholic priest in the language of the Native people he sought to convert. The lyrics in the original Wendat language (the native tongue of the Huron/Wendat people) are attributed to the French Jesuit priest Jean de Brébeuf. The Wendat song was transmitted orally by the tribe until it was written down in late 18th century. Fr. Jean de Brébeuf served as a Catholic missionary to the Wendat/Huron between 1634 and 1648, and immersed himself in the culture and language of the Native residents of New France (Ontario and Quebec). He was ultimately killed along with Wendat villagers after a raid by an Iroquois band. His song, telling the story of the birth of the Christ child and the first Christmas, survived.

Although the song is now most popularly known as the Huron Carol, in the original Wendat it's title is "Jesous Ahatonhia". At the time it was written down in the 1700s by a Huron/Wendat tribal member, Paul Picard, it was also translated it into French and given the title "Hommes, prenez courage, Jésus est né!". The tune was taken from a French folk song, Une Jeune Pucelle ("the Young Maid") that dates back to 1557. The English version of the song was not written until 1926, when Irish-Canadian poet Jesse Edgar Middleton took creative license to provide a set of lyrics that told the same Christmas story but utilized broad First Nations/Native American stereotypes and poetic language not present in the original hymn.

For a copy of these lyrics, visit [www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/huron\\_carol.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/huron_carol.htm).

Today, the song has a complex legacy for Indigenous communities due to the colonization of North American that followed the arrival of early missionaries. Yet, it also represents an artifact of cultural fusion from a community that accepted Christianity and incorporated the new beliefs into their existing social framework. Modern Wendat tribal members recognize that in passing down the hymn with it's lyrics in the Wendat language, it not only speaks to the incorporation of the faith by some Indigenous communities, but also helped preserve the language through the 19th century when its common usage was declining. The song is now sung by Christian churches throughout North America, particularly in Canada, and has been translated into numerous additional Indigenous languages.

In the last ten years or so, there has been a renewed interest from non-Native choirs and churches in performing the hymn in the original language as opposed to the 1920s translation with its sweeping First Nations generalizations. (For example, the line "Mighty Gitchi Manitou" actually comes from an Algonquin word for "God" rather than the Wendat language.) At Fort Nisqually Living History Museum, this song offers an opportunity to explore the crossroads of cultures that emerged at fur trade outposts, and recognize the diversity of individuals who lived and worked at these sites while acknowledging the complex legacy of Euro-American settlement in North America.

### Jesous Ahatonnia

Estenniayon de tsonwe Jesous ahatonnia  
onn' awatewa nd' oki n' onyouandaskwaentak  
ennonchien eskwatrihotat n'onyouandiyonrachatha  
Jesous ahatonnia, ahatonnia. Jesous ahatonnia.

Ayoki onkiennhache eronhiayeronnon  
iontonk ontatiande ndio sen tsatonnharonnion  
Warie onn' awakweton ndio sen tsatonnharonnion  
Jesous ahatonnia, ahatonnia. Jesous ahatonnia.

Achienhkontahonraskwa d' hatirihwannens  
tichion sayonniondetha onhwa achia aharen  
ondaie te hahahakwa tichion sayonniondetha  
Jesous ahatonnia, ahatonnia. Jesous ahatonnia.

Tho ichien st' ahation tethotondi Jesous  
ahwatatende tichion stanchitehawennion  
asayontorenten ihatonk atSION sken  
Jesous ahatonnia, ahatonnia. Jesous ahatonnia.

Onne ontahation chiahonayen Jesous  
ahatichiennonniannon kahachia handiayon  
te honannonronkwannion ihotonk werisen  
Jesous ahatonnia, ahatonnia. Jesous ahatonnia.

Te hekwatatenntenten ahekwachiendaen  
ti hekwannonronkwannion de sonywentenrände  
outoyeti skwannonhwe icherhe akennonhonstha  
Jesous ahatonnia, ahatonnia. Jesous ahatonnia.

The lyrics are provided here as in the article "The complex history of the Huron Carol" *Broadview Magazine* (December 2018), which also notes: "The orthography of the Wendat language was only recently standardized, and there are various transcriptions of Jesous Ahatonnia in use. The above was provided by Arakwa Sioui of the Huron-Wendat First Nation."

The literal translation of the carol illustrates how the Jesuit missionaries incorporated culturally relevant details, such as a greased scalp to show respect, into the Christmas story. This translation courtesy John Steckley/Teondecheron ([wyandot.org/carol.htm](http://wyandot.org/carol.htm)).

### *Literal translation of the Wendat lyrics:*

Have courage, you who are humans; Jesus, he is born; Behold, the spirit who had us as prisoners has fled; Do not listen to it, as it corrupts the spirits of our minds; Jesus, he is born

They are spirits, sky people, coming with a message for us; They are coming to say, "Rejoice (Be on top of life)"; Marie, she has just given birth. Rejoice" Jesus, he is born;

Three have left for such, those who are elders; Tichion, a star that has just appeared on the horizon leads them there; He will seize the path, he who leads them there; Jesus, he is born;

As they arrived there, where he was born, Jesus the star was at the point of stopping, not far past it Having found someone for them, he says, "Come here!" Jesus, he is born;

Behold, they have arrived there and have seen Jesus, They praised (made a name) many times, sahying "Hurray, he is good in nature"; They greeted him with reverence (greased his scalp many times), saying 'Hurray'; Jesus, he is born;

"We will give to him praise for his name, Let us show reverence for him as he comes to be compassionate to us. It is providential that you love us and wish, 'I should adopt them.'" Jesus, he is born.

### **Sources:**

"Jean de Brebeuf, Lyricist" *Canadian Song Writers Hall of Fame*, accessed 11/29/2020.  
<[www.cshf.ca/song/the-huron-carol/](http://www.cshf.ca/song/the-huron-carol/)>

Kallmann, Helmut. "Huron Carol" *Canadian Encyclopedia* (January 2012, ed. January 2014).

Pearson, Will. "The complex history of the Huron Carol" *Broadview Magazine* (Ontario). December 4, 2018. <<https://broadview.org/the-complex-history-of-the-huron-carol/>>